DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 786 HE 030 587

AUTHOR LeBlanc, H. Paul, III
TITLE Applying to Graduate School.
PUB DATE 1996-10-14
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented to the Resident Housing Assistants, University Housing (Carbondale, IL, October 14, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Academic Aspiration; *College Applicants; *College Choice; *College Students; *Decision Making; Degree Requirements; *Graduate Study; Higher Education; Student Financial Aid

ABSTRACT

This paper offers guidelines and recommendations for students applying to graduate school. It discusses motivations for attending graduate school, as well as the process of selecting and applying to specific universities. The paper recommends talking to faculty and graduate students, writing to professional associations, and attending professional meetings and conferences to find out about good programs in a given field. It then suggests that individuals develop a list of 10 schools to inquire further about. It also recommends that students investigate the social and educational environment of the university and department of the schools in which they are interested. The paper recommends applying to three universities, and offers suggestions on assembling an effective application package and applying for financial aid, such as assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships. It then outlines the general requirements for completing master's, specialist, professional, and doctoral degrees. The paper concludes by giving advice on how to make graduate study a successful and rewarding experience. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 414 786

Running head: APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Applying to Graduate School

H. Paul LeBlanc III

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Paper presented to the Resident Housing Assistants, University Housing,

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

October 14, 1996

HE 030 587

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

H. Paul LeBlanc III

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Abstract

The process of applying to graduate school involves many steps. Students who are considering graduate school should plan ahead by asking several questions and gathering information. This paper offers some guidelines and recommendations for applying to graduate school. Specifically, this paper presents a series of questions that students should ask about attending graduate school. The paper discusses the graduate school/program selection process and criteria. The paper gives suggestions and hints for the application to graduate school, as well as attending graduate school. The paper ends with some general advice on the graduate school experience.

Applying to Graduate School

Introduction

Graduate study affords many career opportunities rarely available to individuals with a baccalaureate degree. Certain careers require advanced study in order for an individual to get a "foot in the door." While graduate school may not be for everyone, for others graduate school is the logical continuation of an educational experience which will prepare them for their life's work. It is about this life's work that the individual who is considering graduate school should ask him or herself, "why attend graduate school"?

This question should prompt a careful and critical analysis of the motivation for attending graduate school. Possible motives could be: (a) to advance a career, (b) to become a teacher/ professor, (c) to avoid joining the "real" world, or (d) because there is "nothing better to do." While the first two possible motives are legitimate, the second two, though often cited, demonstrate unclear direction for a vocation. It may not be to a student's advantage to apply to or attend graduate school without clear direction for a vocation. In fact, many graduate programs screen applicants for "fit" between the goals of the program and the applicant's career goals.

Your career goals should be the major consideration when applying to graduate school. You should ask yourself, "What kind of career am I seeking?" Graduate school offers advanced training in professional, academic, and artistic pursuits. Professional pursuits could include medical, law or business schools. Professional graduate programs also include service careers such as counseling, social work, physical or rehabilitative therapy and other careers which require advanced training to obtain licensure for practice. The decision to apply to professional graduate programs are determined by the requirements of these types of career pursuits.

Other types of career pursuits, such as educational or academic vocations, require advanced degrees as legitimate proof of ability. Primary and secondary education requires, minimally, a baccalaureate degree in education and the discipline in which you intend to teach. To teach in a post-secondary education environment, a master's degree is the minimum. Most community colleges will hire teachers with a master's degree, although advancement in pay scale may be dependent upon credit hours completed beyond the master's degree. Many community colleges, on the other hand, are reluctant to hire an individual with a doctorate degree due to a perceived difficulty in retention and the cost of the hire. Colleges and universities, almost invariably, require a doctoral degree for hire at the entry-level assistant professor position. Although some colleges and universities will hire individuals with a master's degree only, these positions are typically lectureships and instructorships on term contract without the possibility of permanent status.

Many students in the arts also choose graduate school to obtain advanced degrees. Most careers in the arts do not require advanced degrees, with the exception of teaching. However, graduate level training in the arts allows artists to further hone their skills with the guidance of mentors. Whether an artist, scholar, academic or professional, advanced training through a graduate program may afford you an opportunity to explore talents and self-actualize in ways not available to students at the undergraduate level.

Selecting and Applying to a Graduate School

Once you decide that graduate school is for you, the next question should be, "how do I select a graduate school?" Like choosing an undergraduate institution, many criteria affect the best choice for a graduate school. The first step, therefore, in selecting a graduate school is specifying the appropriate selection criteria. Many of these selection criteria, such as program

availability in a particular discipline of study, are similar for both undergraduate and graduate studies. However, although the discipline of study may be an important criterion among many others for selecting an undergraduate school, the discipline of study and the reputation of a program in that discipline should be the primary criteria in the selection of a graduate program. Also, whereas the reputation of a university may be a deciding factor for undergraduate program selection, this criterion is of less importance in selecting a graduate school. It is important to point out that a graduate school may have many quality graduate programs. The quality and reputation of a particular graduate program in your discipline of study is more important than the reputation of the graduate school or university in general.

The decision regarding which graduate program and school to apply to, therefore, follows the decision of career path and discipline of study. As in choosing a career path, you should determine what you most enjoy doing. To accomplish this, visualize your vocation/career path for the long term. Once you have made that determination, investigate the means to that goal. If that goal requires advanced study in a particular discipline, then investigate the graduate programs in that discipline.

Tactics for investigating programs involve networking. First, talk to faculty and graduate students at your school and ask for advice about graduate programs in the discipline. Often, faculty and graduate students have experience in the discipline and may know which programs are highly regarded. It is important to talk to as many people you trust about the best program for you. Be aware that faculty at your undergraduate institution may be motivated to persuade you to join their program. Faculty advice should be weighed against your needs and what is best for you. Sometimes the program where you received your undergraduate degree may not be the best

match for your needs. For this reason, it is important to also talk to graduate students in that program.

Another tactic is to contact professional associations in the discipline for information about graduate programs. Professional associations often carry lists of programs in the discipline, and these lists may rank programs according to specific criteria. Be aware that like faculty at a particular school, professional associations may have political motivations for promoting particular programs through their lists. Therefore, it is important to follow up your investigation into graduate programs with one on one interaction. Investigate the faculty in different programs. Check into the specialties and subspecialties of faculty in those programs. Ask yourself if the faculty in a program are interested in the same topics for research and study that you are.

A third tactic for your investigation includes attending discipline specific professional conventions and conferences, and networking with faculty and graduate students from other schools during these conferences. At many professional conventions, schools recruit both students and faculty. Recruitment may occur in formal or informal settings: attend both. At informal gatherings, talk to as many faculty and graduates students as possible. These meetings, as well as the convention itself, can give you a very good sense of the program and discipline in general.

Following your investigation, develop a list of ten schools that you are interested in attending. Inquire at those schools about entrance and other requirements. Remember that many schools have general requirements for graduate school application and specific requirements for colleges, departments or programs. The specific program requirements may and often do supersede the graduate school requirements. For example, a graduate school may require a minimum cumulative GRE score for math and verbal of 1000, or and undergraduate cumulative

GPA of 3.00, whereas the particular program may require a GRE of 1250 and a GPA of 3.25. Also, although the you may meet stated minimum requirements, the actual requirements may differ for highly competitive programs. A highly ranked program may have to select among a group of students with a cumulative GPA of 3.8 or higher due to the number of students applying for admission.

Other issues should be considered when selecting a school and program. For example, does the program offer both master's and doctoral degrees? This may be important if the career path you choose requires work beyond the master's degree. There are many excellent master's only programs, and since moving from master's level to the doctoral level within the same program is not necessary and often not the best choice, applying to a master's only program might be advantageous. If both degrees are not offered, you may want to ask what are the paths for further study and advancement beyond the program? What connections does the program to which you are applying have with other allied programs within the same university? If your intention is to obtain both a master's and doctorate degree at the same institution, then applying to a program which offers both degrees will be a necessity. Furthermore, if your career path is leading toward research, then the existence of a doctoral program may be necessary to obtain the resources needed to adequately train in research and research methods.

Inquire about financial aid and assistance. Many graduate programs may assist students by offering assistantships, fellowships or other scholarships. For students applying to graduate school to pursue a teaching career, obtaining a teaching assistantship is the best option. This form of financial assistance also supplies an apprenticeship into the profession of teaching. Many schools that hire look favorably upon this type of job experience. Research assistantships and

fellowships also have their advantages. You should consider your long term career goals when examining these options.

The most common forms of financial assistance for graduate students are assistantships, fellowships, scholarships and internships. In general, given that a graduate student in a particular program will be better prepared to instruct on material germane to his or her area of study then someone outside of the discipline, teaching and research assistantships are awarded by departments and programs. These assistantships are awarded to meet the instructional or research needs of a department and typically are cost effective measures. Graduate fellowships are awarded by departments and schools based on merit, need or other criteria. Administrative assistantships and internships are more generally awarded to graduate students to meet the service needs of the university. Each of these forms of assistance for the student also provide necessary professional development and training which is integral to the student's apprenticeship into a discipline, as well as to the educational mission of the university.

Financial aid is also related to the cost of living in the area. Universities located in urban centers typically have a higher cost of living. Ask yourself if the financial aid package, including assistantship, cover the cost of living, or will you also have to take out a student loan? Likewise, does the assistantship or fellowship come with a tuition waiver, or do you have to calculate your cost of living to include the cost of tuition and fees? Remember that the cost of living includes not only room and board, but also transportation and other costs. There may be ways to reduce your cost of living by selecting a smaller apartment, or having roommates. Graduate study requires more quiet time and space. You should consider whether the cost of living is within your means while affording you the needs you may have for the graduate school experience to be successful.

One such need is your relative comfort with the area environment (natural, social, and departmental). Comfort in all three of these types of environments is important and should not be overlooked. Regarding the natural environment, is the location of the school and possible living space safe? Does the natural environment afford you opportunities to recreate? The stress of school requires that students have opportunities to participate in non-school related activities, such as hobbies. Inquire whether the school offers opportunities for extra-curricular activities.

These opportunities for extra-curricular activities are important for many to stay physically and emotionally healthy. A comfortable and safe natural and social environment is important to achieve those health goals. Does the social environment afford you opportunities to network and make personal contacts? Despite these opportunities, most of your time will be spent interacting within a department with faculty and other students. More important than the natural and social environment, therefore, is the professional climate of the department. This aspect should not be overlooked. Although a graduate program may look good in terms of courses offered and other criteria, many students may experience a "culture shock" when they are exposed for the first time to the culture of a department. Questions about departmental interaction such as, "Are people kind to each other?" should not be taken for granted.

Academia is a very political place. Faculty egos can and sometimes do get in the way of effective interpersonal interaction. In competitive graduate programs, graduate student egos can also create interactional problems. Unfortunately, most graduate students are not immune to the political maneuverings of their mentors, and sometimes graduate students can be caught in the middle of a conflict which they had no part in creating. Your assessment of departmental climate can be made by talking with as many people as possible, both faculty and graduate students, both inside and outside the department, as well as any recent alumni.

To make your final assessment about a program, you should ask yourself if the program contact answered your questions adequately. If you have doubts about a program, then that program is likely not the best for you. Based upon the information collected from your inquiries, select the top three programs of choice. Selecting three schools is optimal. Admission to graduate school is often competitive, and applying to less than three may mean you do not get selected at all. Any more than three to five schools, and the choice of which school to attend may be agonizingly difficult. Therefore, choose carefully and focus on meeting the entrance requirements of those three schools.

Once you have selected the schools to which you wish to apply, it is time to begin the actual application process. Most graduate schools and programs require a series of documents for application. Start collecting these documents in plenty of time to meet any application deadlines. Documents for entrance requirements, in general, include: (a) graduate entrance exams, (b) academic and financial aid transcripts, (c) letters of recommendation, (d) a letter of application, (e) application forms, (f) proof of citizenship or visa status, (g) medical records and proof of immunization, and other documents.

Graduate entrance exams could include one of the following: GRE, GRE Special, LSAT, GMAT, Miller Analogies. The general GRE has three parts: (a) language, (b) mathematics, and (c) analytic skills. Most schools that require GRE scores combine the language and mathematics scores with a minimum combined score of 1000 required for entrance. However, the GRE score is weighed against other entrance requirements. The school and program should specify which entrance exams they require. These tests are used by graduate programs and schools to determine an applicant's potential for success. The tests are usually offered once in the fall, spring and summer. The exam should be taken two semesters prior to planned enrollment, not including

summer term. The results of the exam should be sent directly to each of the three schools selected.

Schools and programs also require undergraduate academic transcripts. In general, a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.00 (on a four point scale), is required for entrance into graduate programs. Transcripts should be sent directly to the three schools. Once accepted into a program, the school will expect a final transcript demonstrating a completed degree. As well as academic transcripts, most schools require financial aid transcripts from all schools previously attended. These transcripts are needed to determine eligibility for financial aid, such as graduate assistantships, and not supplying these transcripts can hold up admittance into a graduate school.

Most programs also require three letters from former professors who can attest to your abilities to succeed in graduate school. If you intend to apply to graduate school, it is important to develop a rapport with faculty and to demonstrate abilities. The most effective means for developing such rapport is to ask questions and interact in the classroom and to seek out the faculty member to discuss topics relevant to your course of study outside of class. Most faculty are interested in your success and are willing to assist you, particularly when you show initiative. Some programs may require a reference list in lieu of letters of recommendation. Before doing so, be sure to ask for permission to include a faculty member on a list of references.

Additionally, most programs and schools require a letter of application. This is your opportunity to discuss your intentions and aspirations. For your letter of application to the program discuss academic and career goals, areas of study interest, and accomplishments that are related to success in an educational institution. Occasionally a separate letter is required to the graduate school. You may include with the letter of application an educational resume (a curriculum vitae), which is sometimes required. The vita should include degrees held, courses

taught, accomplishments such as papers presented or published (only papers of an academic nature), academic awards or honors, as well as committee or organizational activities related to your studies. Just as you market yourself for a job, application to a graduate program is an exercise in self-promotion.

In most cases, there are several other entrance requirements. The most basic requirement is a completed application form. Typically, you must submit the application form with a non-refundable application fee of (generally) twenty-five dollars. Each of these documents have deadlines associated with them. Generally, program departments accept application materials no later than March 1 for the following fall semester, while graduate schools may accept applications no later than ninety days prior to attendance. These deadlines vary greatly from school to school and program to program, and most programs consider it your responsibility to meet these deadlines: no excuses.

If you do not meet one or more of the requirements, you may be admitted to a graduate program or school provisionally, under probation, or as a non-matriculating student. Provisional admittance may occur when an applicant is unable to supply all of the required documents prior to registration. Probationary admittance may occur when an applicant does not meet one or more requirements but demonstrates potential for success. It is possible to be admitted to a graduate school while not being admitted to a graduate program at that school. In those cases, a student may be admitted as a non-matriculating graduate student (McMullen, 1988; SIUC, 1991). For each of these exceptions, there are limits to the amount of time a student can remain in that status.

Attending Graduate School

Once you are accepted into a program, there are a number of requirements that must be met to earn a degree and graduate. Although these requirements become part of your educational contract once you choose and are admitted into a program, it is beneficial to know what the requirements are prior to applying to a program. Programs do differ in degree requirements, although requirements are typical by discipline. In general, there are four types of advanced degrees: (a) master's, (b) specialist, (c) professional, such as law or medical, and (d) doctoral. Each of these types have the same type of requirements. For purposes of simplicity, the following discussion will cover general requirements for master's and doctoral degrees.

The first general requirement for graduation is number of credit hours passed. For a master's degree, thirty hours of coursework plus six hours for thesis, or thirty-six hours in non-thesis programs are required for graduation. Of those credit hours, a minimum of fifteen hours (not including thesis) must be at the graduate level, the rest can be at the senior undergraduate level provided they are approved for graduate level. For the doctorate, such as the Ph.D., fifty-two to sixty credit hours beyond the master's degree plus twenty-four hours for dissertation are required.

Simply passing courses, however, is not sufficient for academic progress. Often, grades below a "C" are not accepted for calculating credit hours passed, although they are used for calculating GPA. There are also lower limits to the cumulative GPA a graduate student must achieve to be in good standing. Generally, the minimum cumulative GPA needed to progress is 3.00 to 3.25. For example, at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, any student who falls below a GPA of 3.00 for any semester will be placed on academic probation, and any student who does not meet that requirement for two consecutive semesters will be suspended (SIUC, 1991).

Once a student has completed coursework, the student must pass one or more exams. Most master's programs require comprehensive exams following coursework and may require an oral defense of thesis. These comprehensive exams usually test the student over mastery of all material covered in their coursework. Doctoral programs require similar comprehensive exams following coursework. However, these exams may require advancement of knowledge beyond what the student covered in coursework, and may lead toward the dissertation topic. These doctoral exams are often referred to as preliminary exams because they are a requirement to advance to candidacy. Once a doctoral candidate, there are five years to complete the dissertation.

One major difference between undergraduate and graduate study is the requirement of demonstrated original research. This demonstration is conducted through the completion and successful defense of a research project, thesis or dissertation. The master's thesis demonstrates an ability to conduct research with the direction of a faculty member, are typically comprised of five chapters and average in length between 75 to 150 pages, depending on the discipline and requirements of the study. Doctoral dissertations demonstrate an ability to conduct original research, are typically comprised of five chapters and average in length between 100 to 600 pages. Typically, once a student completes the thesis or dissertation, she or he has to defend it before a panel of experts comprised of faculty from the student's department with at least one faculty member from another department.

Only after completing all of these requirements is the student eligible to graduate. The graduate school may have requirements for graduation such as meeting certain formatting criteria for the research report, thesis or dissertation, supplying a copy of the report to the graduate school, filling out forms and paying a fee. Many schools also require continuing enrollment

between the time the student advances to candidacy and all requirements have been met. It is expected that the student at this level will take initiative to succeed. However, schools try to assist the student through the process by supplying materials and offering assistance of differing types to navigate all of the requirements.

Information regarding these requirements and forms of assistance for graduate study (as well as information for application) is available through many organizations and documents. Specific locations for this information can be obtained by reading the graduate catalog or bulletin for the school. Deadlines are often specified in the catalog or in the graduate school calendar. As well, many departments publish a departmental bulletin or handbook of guidelines for graduate students in their programs. Once you are admitted to a program, you should obtain your own copies of these documents. Students are required to abide by the policies specified in the bulletin for the period of time in which they first enroll. If you are investigating programs to which you wish to apply, these catalogs and bulletins are usually available in the reference or education section of the academic library, and in some cases are available through the World Wide Web.

General Advice

Graduate study "differs appreciably" from undergraduate study (McMullen, 1988). Therefore, it is important to consider all aspects of graduate education when contemplating attending graduate school. Below are several issues for prospective graduate students to consider. Depending on your career goals, the choices you make for the school or schools you attend can impact your future career.

For future academicians, it is generally preferable to have baccalaureate, masters, and doctorate degrees from different schools. There are several reasons for this. First, universities tend to prefer to hire individuals with a broad background of experiences. This background is

enhanced with experiences at different schools. Furthermore, obtaining all three degrees from the same institution is not always attractive to potential employers. Obtaining all three degrees from the same institution, particularly if those degrees are in the same discipline, limits the student's exposure to competing theories which may have not been taught at one school. Whereas, obtaining degrees from different institutions potentially exposes the student to different perspectives within a discipline.

Many schools frown upon hiring a student from within their program for permanent faculty status. Although hires do often occur, particularly for temporary positions, permanent hires are less likely to occur due to a concern over academic in-breeding. Academic in-breeding occurs when a lack of exposure to competing theories occurs within a department. When a department hires from among its own students, there exists less chance of scholarly dialogue involving perspectives different from those faculty already within the department. This problem is exacerbated when a graduate has been hired that has all three degrees from the same institution. Sometimes hires do occur from among graduates, but often these hires occur after the alumnus has had experience teaching at other institutions.

Academic jobs most often require a Ph.D. degree. Although some four-year teaching institutions will hire individuals with a master's degree, job advancement beyond lecturer or assistant professor to associate or full professor is not likely without the terminal degree. Community colleges and technical or trade schools will most often hire individuals without the terminal Ph.D. degree, although pay increases with advanced training. However, Community colleges will often not hire an individual with a Ph.D. because with the cost associated with attracting Ph.D.'s.

This leads to another point: unless the profession of choice specifically requires an advanced degree, do not attend graduate school. Having an advanced degree does not automatically translate into more job prospects and higher pay. Often, persons with advanced degrees will be overlooked because they are viewed as over-qualified or too expensive to hire. In this sense it is very important to match the career of choice with the degree sought. Very few jobs outside of academia require or desire a Ph.D. The only notable exceptions to this rule or those jobs that require a senior researcher, such as in the chemical industry. Even in the chemical industry, however, most hires are for chemical engineers with a baccalaureate or perhaps a master's degree. Furthermore, most graduate students accumulate considerable student loan and other debt. The potential for debt accumulation demonstrates understanding the importance of an advanced degree to your career path.

In general, the work-load of graduate school is considerably more intense than undergraduate school. At the undergraduate level, a student may be exposed to research and may assist or even conduct minor research projects. However, most textbooks geared toward undergraduate level classes report on the findings of research in more or less synthesized terms. At the master's level, training begins on the conducting of research with the thesis culminating the apprenticeship of research. At the doctoral level the expectations increase to that of the student conducting major, original research projects as a matter of course. Consequently, most of the graduate student's time is spent doing projects for class. Consider nine to twelve credit hours plus assistantship requirements as a full-time job. Recreation has its place as its intended purpose: to re-create the body and mind after the rigors of study. Extra-curricular activities should be considered after meeting the requirements of study, and then they should be geared specifically for professional advancement. That is, the extra-curricular activities you choose to

engage in should be related to your future career. This is especially true for individuals who choose to enter academia. Do not allow your hobbies to get in the way of your work.

This brings me to my final point: complete the degree in the first attempt, it is much more difficult to get accepted into a graduate program if the first attempt failed. Acceptance into graduate school is predicated on the faculty's belief in your success. If a faculty has reason to believe you will not succeed, despite your GRE scores or a well written letter of application, they will not likely give you a chance. A faculty member's reputation is based on the success of his or her graduate students, particularly if those graduate students continue into academic jobs. That reputation is analogous to the pride of raising offspring. All this means is: if you intend to attend and succeed in graduate school, take it seriously.

Conclusion

Graduate school can be a very rewarding experience. It can also be very trying and the most difficult of your educational experiences. To be successful requires critical forethought. By the time you choose to attend graduate school, you should know what career path you wish to take. Although you may change your career several times in your life, it is your graduate study which will most inform the direction your career path takes you.

References

McMullen, J. (1988). Graduate catalog (Vol. 80, 3). Baton Rouge, LA: Office of Academic Affairs and LSU Public Relations, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College.

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. (1991). Bulletin: 1991-1993 graduate catalog (Vol. 33, 1). Carbondale, IL: University Electronic Communications, Author.

Author Note

H. Paul LeBlanc III is a doctoral candidate in speech communication at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, where he is serving as the Vice-president for Graduate School Affairs for the Graduate and Professional Student Council. He received his master of arts degree in speech communication at Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1992 and his baccalaureate in philosophy at St. Mary's University of San Antonio, Texas in 1988.